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UNHCR'S World

Refugees

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Cover: *(clockwise from top left)* Living conditions are often primitive for UNHCR staff. Bathing on the banks of the Nile in southern Sudan. Photo: © W. Ulrich.

High Commissioner Sadako Ogata in Bardera, Somalia. Photo: UNHCR / P. Mountzos.

UNHCR staff and returnees in Sipovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina. Photo: UNHCR / A. Hollmann.

Distribution to Tajik refugees in northern Afghanistan. Photo: UNHCR / J. Seath.

UNHCR staff and Ethiopian U.N. soldier at Ruzizi Bridge, Bukavu, Zaire. Photo: UNHCR / H.J. Davies.

UNHCR staff in Galang, Indonesia. Photo: © P. Conti Lander.

UNHCR's World

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UNHCR compound near the entrance to Katale refugee camp, Goma region, Zaire. UNHCR / A. Hollmann

The sun never sets...

Welcome to UNHCR's world — a world inhabited by millions of refugees and displaced people who through no fault of their own have been caught up in some of the greatest upheavals of the 20th century.

But the presence of more than 5,000 UNHCR staff in some 120 countries means it is also a concerned and caring world, one marked by countless examples of courage and perserverance as refugees strive to rebuild their shattered lives.

About 80 percent of UNHCR's staff work in the field, many of them in dangerous and difficult circumstances. The hours are long, the work is hard, and the living conditions are often primitive. Separation from family for extended periods is common. But there is also great personal satisfaction, gained from helping people when they most need it and then finding lasting solutions to their plight.

In this issue, we will take a global tour of some of UNHCR's worldwide activities, looking at the daily lives and work of staff members in some of the most remote places on earth, as well as in Geneva headquarters and elsewhere.

We'll begin in Oceania and Asia, where UNHCR's day begins, and follow the sun west through South and Central Asia, Europe, Africa, and then across the Atlantic to the Americas.

By journey's end, we'll have circled UNHCR's world, gathering insights not only into the lives of the 27 million refugees and others of concern to us, but into the motivations, challenges and successes of some of the many dedicated humanitarians who are doing their best to protect and help the uprooted, wherever they may be.

Where UNHCR's day begins

Anna Wang Heed
UNHCR Legal Liaison Officer – Auckland, New Zealand

UNHCR wakes up to each new day with Legal Liaison Officer Anna Wang Heed, our staff member closest to the International Date Line.

Wang Heed's Auckland house is 30 minutes away from the international airport where almost all of New Zealand's roughly 1,000 asylum-seekers a year arrive in the country.

Wang Heed is on extended mission to New Zealand from the UNHCR regional office in Australia. Her job encompasses the range of UNHCR's work in developed countries: advocacy, fund-raising, training, promotion of refugee law and help for individual asylum-seekers. "There's nothing boring or narrow about Anna's work," says Regional Representative Jahanshah Assadi. "It's really multi-dimensional; there's the whole advocacy aspect, and a lot of hands-on work. Almost uniquely, we are key decision-makers in the New Zealand appeals process, which means that Anna is deciding whether an asylum-seeker's case is valid, or not. This is a very real responsibility."

Wang Heed is 35 and Swedish, with an academic background in international law. She speaks five languages in addition to her native tongue (English, French, Spanish, German and Mandarin). Wang Heed began working for UNHCR in China, as a legal officer. After three years, she transferred to Australia. In May 1996, she became the first UNHCR officer to be based in New Zealand year-round. Her husband, a Chinese national, lives mostly in China. He couldn't obtain a work permit in Australia, and finally gave up trying. "It's a typical UNHCR marriage," Wang Heed sighs.

Personal issues aside, Wang Heed's job is clearly a challenge. A normal day's work might mean attending the New Zealand Refugee Status Appeals Authorities, as one of two (or sometimes three) judges. Having read through a full dossier on the asylum-seeker — including information about the country of origin and the original rejection of his or her case — the decision-makers interview the claimant. "I interviewed asylum-seekers in China, and this is exactly the same thing," Wang Heed explains. "It's quite thorough, and it could take all morning, or even a whole day. We're basically going back to the beginning of the whole process, having read all the previous statements and anything else that might be material. We have to decide whether this person really does have a well-founded fear of persecution at home. It's a heavy responsibility and it really confronts you with what all our work is all about."

A typical case up for appeal might be a person loosely involved with the Sikh movement in the Punjab, and who may have obtained a visitor's permit to New Zealand and claimed asylum on arrival. Many such cases are rejected, because the judges feel there is unlikely to be ongoing persecution by Indian authorities in the Punjab. Other appeals may stem from Iranians, who arrive via South-East Asia, where they often purchase false passports and visas from unscrupulous migrant smugglers and ditch them before they land.

But Wang Heed isn't just a judge — she's a trainer, an advocate, a fund-raiser. New Zealand enjoys a liberal body of jurisprudence regarding asylum issues, including claims for refugee status based on women's issues such as female genital mutilation and refusal to comply with social strictures. In addition to asylum-seekers who arrive in New Zealand directly, the country also accepts roughly 800 refugees every year under a resettlement quota, giving asylum to people who have fled their homes, but who are not safe in their country of first asylum. In addition, New Zealand recently announced it would increase its contribution to UNHCR by 25 percent. It's a remarkable record.

Wang Heed works to keep it going. "We're the only U.N. presence here, so there's a lot of interest and a lot of demand, from NGOs, from the public, and of course from asylum-seekers as well," she says. "You get all kinds of enquiries. New Zealand is far away — far from a lot of things — and the public isn't necessarily attuned to refugee issues. Until recently, there wasn't a lot of immigration here from developing countries, and with Somalis or Ethiopians, who suddenly look very different, we have seen a few very nasty attacks on refugees' homes in recent months. You have to work to inform the public, so that people see that refugees are not a threat to anyone."

Far from paradise

BRIAN LANDER
UNHCR Protection Officer – Galang, Indonesia

Brian Lander is a 29-year-old American from Seattle who lives with his wife on a tropical island. His life, however, is far from paradise. Lander is a UNHCR protection officer, responsible for the care and protection of some 4,000 Vietnamese boat-people detained in a military-run camp on Galang island, Indonesia.

By local standards, conditions in the camp are adequate, but spartan. The boat-people live in huts that may leak in monsoon rains, with health-care that is basic and schools they organize themselves. Above all, they live without many options: all have been individually screened by trained adjudicators, and all have been found to have no real claim to refugee status. Because they face no persecution in Viet Nam, and since no resettlement countries will accept them, the Indonesian authorities have decided that they should go home. They can go voluntarily, under the auspices of UNHCR, or they can face deportation. (After years of assisting these and thousands of other screened-out non-refugees, the international community decided that after June 30, 1996, UNHCR should phase out its assistance to Vietnamese boat-people who can safely go home).

Several times a week, Lander crosses to Galang from his home on nearby Bintan island. For many months, he lived on Galang itself, then moved when his wife joined him in Indonesia. As a protection officer, Lander's job involves constantly being on the alert for potential problems that need solving before they get out of hand. That means developing relationships of respect and trust with the boat-people — and also with camp officials. Every day brings meetings that may raise new issues, requiring careful follow-up or urgent action on matters ranging from food distribution to the elderly, the urgent medical condition of a newborn, or an adolescent's unpaid debts.

Lander counsels the detainees to volunteer to go home to Viet Nam, pointing out that 80,000 people have already safely done so. He works with refugee women to encourage them to take part in camp activities. When the Vietnamese resisted the election of women to the camp committee, Lander and his local Indonesian Social Services counterpart organized parallel consultative groups of women whom they meet regularly, to ensure that their needs are being met. "The male-dominated camp committees couldn't deal fairly with issues affecting the women in the camp," Lander explains. "On many occasions I found that the camp committee was protecting men in the camp against serious allegations from the women. Only through the women's consultative groups could I get the whole story and decide how best to intervene."

In 1994, there was rioting in Galang. Subsequently, several boat-people who had destroyed property, or who had attacked the authorities with home-made fire-bombs, were arrested, and transferred to Bintan. Lander began visiting them almost daily, insisting that they receive better conditions, arranging for several to be freed, and recognizably improving the lives of many others. To this day, Lander knows the name and background of every one of the detained men. When he walks with a visitor through the cells where they are held, they cluster to speak with him in small, urgent groups.

But perhaps the people whose lives Lander has most improved are among the most vulnerable in the Vietnamese community: teenage girls. Whether under pressure from their parents (who may have been seeking special favors) or from the soldiers and policemen themselves, Lander found that a number of young girls had been involved in sexual liaisons with camp officials, some of them potentially involving a degree of coercion.

The subject was intensely sensitive, both for the Vietnamese community and for Indonesian officialdom, and emerged only after months of regular contacts. Lander kept a cool head, and discreetly (but firmly) raised the issue, again and again, week after week, until it was dealt with — and he keeps on raising it, just in case, whenever he senses that the need arises. Today, any suspicion of such a sexual relationship means prompt investigation by Indonesian government officials, with serious sanctions if the allegations are true.

But camp officials in Galang are rotated every six months. So every six months Lander begins a new dialogue with the camp commander and other officers, helping them to relate their day-to-day work to the distant wording of U.N. conventions on refugee law and other human rights issues, and building up a new relationship from scratch. He is part law professor, part prison visitor, part-school counsellor, part-womens' advocate. Every day involves a depth and breadth of responsibility that most 29-year-olds might find crushing.

Meanwhile, Lander lives on an island with plenty of coconut trees and fishing boats, but few medical facilities, no shopping, and erratic phone and electricity service. His wife, a translator, has no employment. "This is a job I care about," Lander says. "But there's no getting past it: it's hard."

Border mission

Ruven Menikdiwela
UNHCR Protection Officer – Bangkok, Thailand

My day begins early when I'm on mission to the Thai-Myanmar border. Normally, I have meetings lined up with the local military for 7:30 or 8:00 in the morning, since they start their day at the crack of dawn and can be found at their base only in the early hours. I am generally accompanied by a Thai colleague, Songsit, and a UNHCR driver, Wattana.

About 83,000 people from ethnic minority groups in Myanmar, mostly Karens (77,000) and Karennis (6,000) are sheltered in a string of camps along the Thai-Myanmar border. Some of them have fled separatist conflicts against the Myanmar central government. The Thai authorities have been reluctant to permit UNHCR to station an officer permanently at the border. UNHCR thus monitors the situation through a roving protection officer — me. The refugees are primarily assisted by a group of non-governmental organizations known as the Burma Border Consortium.

On this particular mission, we are visiting the Karen camps in Mae Sariang district of Mae Hong Son province. Local military units are responsible for surveillance of the border and the security of the refugee settlements there. These are essential issues, since there have been 44 armed attacks (launched from across the border) against the camps in the first five months of 1996. The military officials outline the security arrangements in the various camps within their jurisdiction with the aid of detailed maps. Our next appoint-

UNHCR protection officers meet with Karen refugees from Myanmar at Mae Ra Ma Luang camp, Thailand.

ment is with local civilian authorities who administer the district and who are also responsible for administration of the camps there. They provide us with information regarding administrative measures taken in the camps, such as efforts to register the camp populations.

When we leave this meeting, it is already late morning. We find a truck full of soldiers who are there to escort us to the camps. This military escort has been a regular feature of our missions during the last 12 months. The Thai government insists on this because of frequent rebel attacks from across the border that have resulted in several casualties. The officer in charge of the group accompanies us in our Land Cruiser, leaving the truck to follow.

The journey to the camps that we will be visiting takes about three hours, most of it jolting along a dirt road up a mountain, leading deep into remote border territory. Our driver, Wattana, lives for these border missions, which provide a welcome relief from the stress and boredom of driving in Bangkok. I, on the other hand, clutch the door handle grimly and wonder for the umpteenth time why I did not pick a more sedentary occupation. However, we are lucky since this is the dry season and access to the camps, although difficult, is still possible. This will not be the case during the monsoon season. We are also fortunate in that we see some of the most spectacular scenery in Thailand during these journeys to the camps. The scenery makes it worth being occasionally stuck in the mud, stranded in the middle of a river, or almost plunging off the side of a mountain.

The camps are generally divided into sections, each with its own leader. Touring the camps can mean clambering up slopes and wading through streams. We are generally met on all sides by shy, but beaming smiles. This, and the serenity on the faces of the women (almost unbelievable considering the trials they have undergone) are what strikes one most.

UNHCR / H.J. Deane

A Karenni refugee child from Myanmar at Camp 3, Mae Hong Son Province, Thailand.

When we arrive at the camp, a sprawling collection of bamboo huts, we drive straight to the camp leader's house. Other refugee leaders are also present. We discuss conditions in the camp, the security of the refugees and developments in Myanmar. The soldiers remain discreetly in the background during this meeting. We also try to get to the bottom of any rumors flying around the camps in regard to possible rebel incursions in the area. Generally, such rumors are difficult to verify, but we warn the Thai security forces in the camp, just in case.

We then meet with the international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who provide food, medical care and sanitation in the camps. We are given a briefing on the general camp situation and informed that stockpiling of all material supplies in preparation for the monsoon season has already begun.

Thereafter, we tour the camp clinics, hospitals and schools. We talk to the health workers and teachers, who are all refugees trained by the NGOs to provide these services, and to their patients and students. Time permitting, we roam the camp, talking with residents. One of the refugee leaders acts as our guide and interpreter.

However, priority is given to meeting with new arrivals, who are the surest source of information about current developments in the border areas of Myanmar. Such information can be vital in shaping our positions in regard to each of the minority groups and in assisting UNHCR's determination of refugee claims of Myanmar asylum-seekers in Bangkok.

When we leave the camp it is already past midday, but we still have other camps to visit. Lunch generally consists of a standard diet of sticky rice and fried chicken, consumed in the Land Cruiser while driving from one camp to another, with a wonderful disregard for hygiene and digestion. We arrive at the second camp after an hour's drive. We follow the same routine there as in the previous camp. Depending on the time and distance between camps, we also try to visit a third camp before nightfall. Our military escort gets visibly nervous towards dusk, and makes frequent references to the time. He heaves an audible sigh of relief when we are finally on the road towards the town, but only relaxes when he sees the lights twinkling at us in the darkness. Before we part, we make arrangements with him for visiting other camps in the district the next day. It will be a replay of today, in the wild and rugged hills of the border area.

All things to all people

JENNIFER ASHTON
UNHCR Social Services Officer – Jhapa, Nepal

A UNHCR social services officer is all things to all people: the person who cares for the most vulnerable; who tries to find solutions to the irreparable; who works with the refugees to strengthen their capacity for self-help; who minds the schools, the clinics, the trauma centers that operate for refugees.

"My work is so varied. I'm responsible for such wide-ranging areas — I can never be quite sure of what will happen on any day," says Jennifer Ashton, a 44 year-old Australian officer in UNHCR's Jhapa sub-office in Nepal. Staff in Jhapa include a head of sub-office and one officer each covering social services, protection (legal rights) and field (program and logistics). Together, they help oversee the care of more than 90,000 refugees from Bhutan.

Refugees fled southern Bhutan in the early 1990s, claiming to have been targeted for human rights abuse. Their seven camps around Jhapa are clean and orderly, and provide basic assistance: health care, education, and skills training projects that help the refugees earn some income while providing basic needs like soap. Ashton monitors projects to help women learn skills and to counsel victims of rape or torture. She also monitors schools, clinics, and out-reach programs for vulnerable families.

UNHCR-funded programs, implemented with NGOs, train women to read and write, and teach basic legal rights. Ashton encourages women to run for the annual election of camp committees, which manage many aspects of camp life. She ensures that a network of concerned refugees — one or two per hundred families — keeps an eye on elderly people, the disabled, and women looking after families alone.

Ashton is an administrator and monitor. She liaises with relevant local officials, oversees projects and sorts out major issues.

"Sometimes it seems as though something that might take half an hour in Australia is taking days and days to work through in the camps," Ashton sighs. "But it's by that endless talking that they all — the Nepalese officials, the refugees, the NGOs — come to feel that they are all on board, that the solution really is the right one."

The quality of social services in Jhapa's camps is often praised, but Ashton insists that the credit for camp management should go to the whole UNHCR team. "The international staff is Thai, Sri Lankan, Filipina and Australian," she wrote in a recent note. "We bring different backgrounds and skills to the job. Arun, the head, who has worked with UNHCR for 16 years, brings to bear his strong knowledge of how the organization works. He has also developed good working relations with all the dignitaries and politicians — local and refugee — which requires skills in tact and diplomacy, and which really makes our work flow easily. Nihal, a former senior army officer, brings his experience to bear in organization and logistics. Corinna, with her legal training, provides logical, carefully-reasoned problem-solving responses. Our local staff were all recruited into the operation with no previous knowledge or experience of refugees, this being the first refugee crisis in the area. They've all learned an enormous amount on the job.

The international staff is Thai, Sri Lankan, Filipina and Australian. We bring different backgrounds and skills to the job.

Most of Jhapa's refugees have lived in exile for five years or more. "In terms of camp setup and services, these are really nice places — in large part due to the refugees themselves," says Ashton. "But they've been waiting so long, with no solution in sight. We're seeing quite a bit of despair, more alcoholism, more domestic violence; the problems that are generated by idleness and prolonged life in camps."

Ashton lives downstairs from her landlord, a bank manager in the sleepy, dusty town of Bhadrapur. Her children — James, 13, and Alexandra, 10 — live in Katmandu with their father, who has given up his job as a geophysicist and now freelances for Australian magazines. Plane service is sporadic, at best. During the monsoon season, there is none. Ashton rarely sees her family more than once a month. Temperatures climb as high as 40 degrees Celsius; the humidity is stifling. It's not the worst place UNHCR operates, but life in Bhadrapur is lonely, hot and hard.

"I love my job," Ashton says. "The children know that I'm happiest when I'm doing this sort of thing. But if I talk about it too much, to be honest, I want to just burst into tears. And for my husband — well, it's hard for anyone to be an accompanying spouse; awful to be asked all the time, 'What do you do?'

"Refugees don't usually flee to capital cities. They go to insecure and remote border-areas where your family can't come with you. So this is the life that UNHCR staff live," Ashton continues, ruefully. "It's rewarding and it's important, but at the end of the day, the hardest thing about working for UNHCR is the enormous personal cost."

Life among the ruins

Terry Pitzner
UNHCR Officer in Charge – Kabul, Afghanistan

In most places, you wake to a dawn chorus of birds or traffic. In Afghanistan, during certain periods in certain cities, you wake to a dawn chorus of gunfire, or rocket explosions. Outside the capital, Kabul, this dawn chorus is often insignificant: bullets loosed into the sky to celebrate a wedding or the rising of the sun, or nothing in particular. Or perhaps it heralds the start of a feud or a conflict that may last a couple of hours, a day, a week or a year. After a while you can tell by the tone and intensity whether you can roll over for another half-hour's sleep — or whether you should be crouching behind the sandbags.

Within Kabul there has been little to celebrate since 1993, when rockets started falling sporadically on the city, which had escaped relatively lightly during the 10-year Soviet occupation and the ensuing struggle to oust the communist government. On 1 January 1994, two years after that government finally fell, a major shift in alliances brought full-scale war to Kabul. The bullets and rockets are deadly serious for the city's 1 million inhabitants and for the aid agencies struggling to alleviate the effects of two and a half years of war and intermittent siege, displacement, disfigurement and death. Thousands have been killed since 1993.

The officer in charge of UNHCR operations in Kabul is Terry Pitzner, a 54-year-old American who arrived in Kabul in March 1995, the day after opposition Taliban fighters were pushed out of the southern part of the city. Both he and his UNHCR colleague, Stephanie Aquino, have grown accustomed to the noise and the ever-present danger that today's rockets might be heading in their direction. "You just learn to live with that," said Pitzner. "After all, a million other people are living with the same dangers we are." He seems more concerned that the daily agenda of the aid programs is constantly affected by the arbitrary pattern of destruction.

"Rockets have rained on Kabul daily for the past 10 months, since a six-month informal ceasefire broke down. As U.N. Team Leader and Security Coordinator, as well as being in charge of UNHCR's operations for returnees and displaced in Kabul, my daily concerns and responsibilities are constantly changing — depending on where the rockets are landing," he said. "Do I move our office, or the UNICEF or UNDP offices again? Where are the safe areas? The Turkish Ambassador's bedroom was hit while he was in bed. Will his embassy leave too? Our office safe, containing $70,000, was stolen by 15 armed men. How will the loss of all our cash affect our program? What's happening on the human rights front? Can the local human rights NGO, which UNHCR is supporting, do something to help?"

Pitzner and Aquino both have long experience of the difficult living and working conditions in Afghanistan. They served together in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif, where there is a camp for refugees from Tajikistan. Aquino then went on to work with Afghan returnees in the western city of Herat, until the day after it suddenly fell to the Taliban last autumn. In March 1994, Pitzner was transferred from Mazar to the eastern city of Jalalabad, where a huge camp-city had sprung up for the displaced from Kabul. By the summer of 1994, the camp had a population of 130,000. After a year, as the displaced began returning to the capital, he was put in charge of UNHCR's office there.

"In spite of it all, I enjoy being here," says Pitzner. "The Afghans are remarkable people. Whatever strength and initiative we may have is drawn from the fact that every day we witness their extraordinary capacity to survive, to do business, to provide for their families, to continue life among the ruins. You give them a little and they make the absolute most of it."

To assist individuals would be more or less impossible under present conditions, so the program run by Pitzner and Aquino is aimed more at aiding entire communities. "This has been highly successful," said Pitzner. "UNHCR/WFP food-for-work programs employ large numbers of returnees to repair Kabul's badly damaged infrastructure."

As well as rehabilitating roads, schools and water systems, he is in overall charge of a number of programs which aim to rehabilitate people. "We do vocational training and education, focusing mainly on disabled or otherwise impaired returnees, widows, unskilled youths. Afghans have lost 17 years to war and the future of Afghanistan will depend on this generation. If they are unskilled and uneducated, the prospects are grim."

Pitzner is well-qualified for this side of the job. For 24 years, he provided residential treatment for emotionally disturbed and disabled children in the United States. Then in 1989, aged 47, he made a radical change of life, moving to Peshawar to work for an NGO that was caring for war-wounded Afghans. He was 50 when he joined UNHCR as a field officer and moved again, inside Afghanistan.

He shows no sign of wanting to leave. As he points out, there are many places in Afghanistan where you wake up to the sound of birds singing. He just doesn't get to visit them very often.

On top of the world

Franci Smailagic
UNHCR Sub-Office Head – Osh, Kyrgyzstan

3:45 a.m: The alarm clock goes off. Getting out of bed is tough, but is made a bit easier by the promise of an interesting day far from the office and its telephones, meetings and administrative tasks. A mug of strong coffee and I am all set.

As part of its preventive/early warning strategy in Central Asia, UNHCR opened two offices in Kyrgyzstan in October 1995. I am the only international staff-member in Kyrgyzstan's second city, Osh. UNHCR's main office is in the capital, Bishkek. In winter, we're cut off from each other for long periods when the snow blocks the high mountain passes.

For security reasons, my home and office are located in the same UNHCR compound in Osh. After the latest attempt to burgle and burn down the office, I begin each day warily. With a small CS tear-gas spray in my right hand, I enter the office and slowly check the premises. "Everything's OK," says the watchman. "It was a quiet night."

I proceed to the garage.The guard-dog was silent during the night. Nevertheless, I check the UNHCR vehicle carefully for strange wires and hidden objects, a habit I picked up while working in Bosnia and Tajikistan. It seems wise to continue the practice here in Osh. There is no war here, no terrorism; the authorities and most of the inhabitants are friendly and cooperative. But over the past few years, Osh has become one of the main distribution hubs on the new, blossoming northern drug-route from Afghanistan and other production centers in Central Asia. The drugs mafia is omnipotent and does not draw a distinction between UNHCR and UN-DCP [the U.N. Drug Control Program]: in their eyes, we are all the enemy.

The vehicle does not seem to have been tampered with. However, an uneasy feeling persists as I turn the key in the ignition. When the engine has roared smoothly to life, I finally relax. At such moments I always ask myself whether I will ever again be able to start a car without a second thought — the result of a career in dangerous places.

I began my UNHCR life as a local staff-member in the northern Bosnian town of Banja Luka, which I had to leave in a hurry after receiving a tip-off that the repeated death-threats were about to become reality. In Tajikistan, where I spent two years, there were many tense moments and the field staff lived with strict security rules and curfews. If it weren't for the drugs mafia, and their inability to distinguish between different U.N. agencies, Osh would be far more relaxing than either of my previous postings. In many ways, it's a pleasant, lively, cheerful place, despite underlying tensions.

I always ask myself whether I will ever again be able to start a car without a second thought — the result of a career in dangerous places.

I leave the compound and drive through Osh. The city is dark and absolutely deserted. I pick up my driver, Erkin, and my assistant, Sasha. By 4:30 a.m. we are heading out of Osh towards the border with Tajikistan and China.

We are trying to check out unconfirmed reports that, due to the recent escalation in clashes between Tajik government and opposition forces in northern Tajikistan, sizeable numbers of people are leaving their homes and will try to cross the border into Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan already has some 30,000 Tajik refugees and others who left Tajikistan in the wake of the 1992 civil war.

The border region of Saritash is some 200 kms south of Osh. At one point, the road climbs to 3,600 meters. To watch the birth of a new day from a mountain this high is a breathtaking experience.

It takes us more than four hours to reach Saritash. At each of the nine checkpoints on the way, we are stopped by bleary-eyed militiamen. Explanations, document checks, puzzled looks and we are allowed to proceed.

When we finally reach Saritash, we are stopped at the main checkpoint, which is manned by the Russian Border Army. A Russian officer asks for instructions over the radio. After some time, we overhear the response crackling across the airwaves: "Let the U.N. proceed. We informed all posts of their presence in the area."

There are two roads into Tajikistan: one along the Garm Valley, via the town of Jirgital, the other through Gorno-Badakhshan to the towns of Murgab and Khorog. The Pamir mountain range, through which both roads pass, is one of the most spectacular regions in the world — in effect, the western tail of the Himalayas. Between the two roads soars 7,495-meter Mount Communism.

The Garm Valley has been closed to all traffic for four weeks, but the road to Murgab is open. The Russian border guard says he has not heard of any refugees arriving from Tajikistan. But there may be some "opposition terrorists" in the area, so be careful.

We take the Murgab road. It is only 45 kms to the border but it takes us two hours to get there. The road changes from bad to worse and is constantly climbing. Finally we

reach the border, situated at 4,680 meters above sea-level. One last Russian Border Army checkpoint and we enter Tajikistan.

Two sleepy Tajik militiamen want to check our documents and search the vehicle. After learning we are with UNHCR — which is well-known in Tajikistan after a major three-year operation in the south-west of the country — they forget about searching the vehicle. Instead, they start claiming they are refugees too and ask for immediate help.

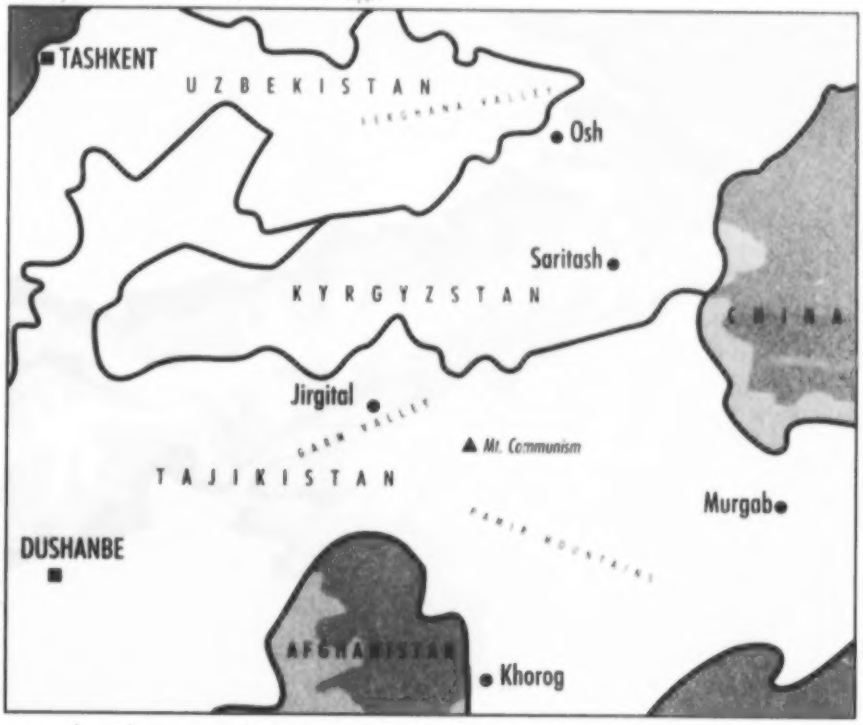
Soon we all are sitting in an old fuel tanker that has been converted into an office. Our canned fish and their tea combine to make a reasonable meal that helps stimulate the conversation. They inform us that the border is only open for people with a special permit. They have instructions not to let refugees enter Kyrgyzstan. There are numerous checkpoints on the road between here and Murgab — all of them supposed to prevent unauthorized movements. In the last couple of months, no would-be refugee had made it through to their checkpoint.

As we sat and talked with the Tajik militiamen, the weather was changing every few minutes. Sunny and warm one moment, sudden rain the next, then a strong, cold wind, then snow, then sun again. Four seasons in an hour. At an altitude of 4,680 meters, the air was thin and our lungs were suffering. I felt quite weak and my body was trembling.

The Russian Border Army and the Tajik militiamen had told us that these symptoms can be alleviated by vodka, hashish or something very sweet. We opted for something sweet — chocolate — but it did not help much. Judging by huge piles of empty vodka bottles surrounding the check-points, the soldiers usually opt for a different panacea.

We turn back and re-enter Kyrgyzstan. At the first checkpoint, a Russian soldier (who manages to hold onto a machine gun, an automatic assault-rifle, a pistol, half a dozen hand-grenades and a lot of ammunition while simultaneously checking our documents) tells us that he is very, very tired. No, it has nothing to do with carrying so many arms. He didn't sleep the previous night: problems on the Chinese border.

We head back towards Osh. I cannot help wondering how the Tajik refugees already in Kyrgyzstan managed to cross these huge and inhospitable mountains. How did they manage to pass these checkpoints? What happened between them and the militia? How did children and old people, hungry and thirsty, sick and tired, find enough strength to keep going? How many of them did not survive?



By the time we get back, Osh is dark and deserted again. I will take Sasha and Erkin home, but first we have to fill up the vehicle's petrol-tank and jerry-cans from our main storage tank. One of the basic rules says always leave the vehicle with a full tank overnight in case of emergencies.

The tank is full, Erkin and Sasha are safely at home and I am back in the office. On my desk, I spot a message from Aygul, our secretary, reminding me that tomorrow is the deadline for sending various administrative and financial documents to headquarters in Geneva. It also says there are unconfirmed rumors that due to fighting and unrest in various parts of Tajikistan, people are attempting to cross into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Saritash is not the only possible entry point. I make a quick decision. "HQ can wait," I think, as I pick up the walkie-talkie to call Sasha and Erkin and tell them I will pick them up early tomorrow morning. Sorry — later this morning. Tomorrow has already turned into today.

By mid-June, some 200-300 Tajiks (mostly of Kyrgyz origin) had arrived in Kyrgyzstan.

A Vladivostok weekend

ISABELLE MIHOUBI
UNHCR Protection Officer — Moscow, Russian Federation

It was not going to be an ordinary weekend — one of those charming little autumn weekends in Moscow, when the air is still warm and it's good to walk among the cafés.

The Foreign Ministry was requesting UNHCR's help in Vladivostok, where three North Koreans had asked for asylum. One was in prison. He had attempted suicide by slitting his wrists. Another was in hospital with a broken leg — he was wounded trying to flee the policemen who wanted to question him. The third was hiding in an apartment.

For years, North Korea had sent immigrant workers to the USSR, where they lived in closed camps. When Russia became more open, the North Korean workers could leave their camps. Many used the opportunity to try to leave for good.

Were these three asylum-seekers refugees? And if so, could they be resettled in a third country? The Foreign Ministry wanted our advice.

On Friday, I headed to Vladivostok. Long a military port, Vladivostok is strategically situated at the eastern extremity of Russia. There is a seven-hour time difference with Moscow. The trip took 15 hours by air in a poorly maintained plane that creaked and jumped all through the journey. The food was appalling. A normal flight.

My colleague and myself finally arrive at the end of the world. Vladivostok is an awful place, sad and poor, suffering from all the disadvantages of industrialization. The only note of color in this gray place: the cars are all white (and all Japanese).

We head for the prison, a well-guarded building with 36 doors to go through — but the security system is so archaic that it seems quite human. Still, the conditions are awful.

The director receives us, offers us a beer and asks me where I come from. When I say I'm French, he calls all his colleagues to tell them there's a French woman in his office. Until recent years, Vladivostok was one of the Soviet Union's closed cities. Even after it opened to foreigners, very few made the trip.

The director calls one of the asylum-seekers, whom he says is a 'criminal' because he has been judged an illegal resident. The man arrives in handcuffs, terrified and shaking like a leaf at the idea of being sent back to his home country. There's no time to establish trust. I must interview him now. It's obvious that he is a refugee, and South Korea is ready to receive him.

Eventually, we get all three North Koreans assembled at the South Korean mission. Everyone is nervous. They are taken to the airport. Till the last step on the plane's staircase, they couldn't believe it. But when they realized it was true, they were so moved, so completely overwhelmed, that they were speechless, incapable of even expressing their gratitude. They could only look at us with immense smiles.

We closed the case in 48 hours. We were exhausted, but delighted with our work. We celebrated with the Russians.

Time to go back to Moscow. The first leg, an eight-hour flight, brings us to Novossibirsk. We are told to wait in transit. The plane stops in the middle of the airstrip. We get out. It's winter! We can't even see the terminal. We are guided by the smell of grilled meat. The terminal has been invaded by a noisy, feverish crowd all desperate to get into our already full plane.

When they realized it was true, they were so moved, so completely overwhelmed, that they were speechless, incapable of even expressing their gratitude.

I finally snap. With my thin shoes and a thinner raincoat, I wasn't equipped for a snow storm. In Vladivostok the temperature had been a balmy 10 degrees Celsius. I was freezing now, and exhausted. I told myself I would never make it through this crowd back to the plane. My colleague caught my despairing glance and started yelling in French. The unexpected result: everyone around us fell back in surprise. My colleague pushed me back into the overcrowded, filthy, smelly plane that I now so desperately wanted.

We arrived back in Moscow on Sunday, zombies after two 15-hour flights in less than 72 hours, across several time zones. Next day I was in the office, completely wasted. Oddly, nobody seemed surprised.

Displaced in Daghestan

Larry Hollingworth
UNHCR Head of Office – Makhachkala, Daghestan

Dawns breaks at around five and the wind howls in off the Caspian Sea, rattling the windows of the flat where I live with the other international members of the UNHCR team. I get up at 6:30, wash and go to the office. We have two offices, one in the capital, Makhachkala, and another nearer to the Chechen border at Khasavayurt. We are assisting the local authorities to look after about 40,000 people, all displaced by the vicious war in Chechnya, which, thank God, seems to have paused if not ended.

Daghestan, known here as "The Country of Mountains," is an amazing place. The north is flat steppe land and the south chain after chain of mountain ranges. There are 34 main national groups, each with their own language, all living harmoniously. About 15 percent of marriages are mixed.

The Daghestani people are renowned for their outstanding hospitality. That hospitality is reflected in the fact that the majority of the displaced are housed with host families. On average, families of five have taken in and cared for families totaling 17. Food, clothing and living space are all shared equally. The generosity of the hosts is, of course, now strained by the length of stay of their "guests." UNHCR receives more and more requests to help local Daghestani hosts who are now themselves suffering as a result of their generosity. We are funding small projects which will benefit the community — both permanent and displaced. This includes boring wells, installing pipelines, opening water points. We have provided trucks for the collection of sewage and garbage. We have built a bakery and carried out repairs within the local hospital.

Internally displaced people from Chechnya in Nuradilovo, Daghestan, Russian Federation.

UNHCR / S. Sassi

UNHCR / F. Reiter

UNHCR funds repairs in collective centers, including this roof work being done on a building housing internally displaced people in the Daghestan town of Khasavyurt.

Ten per cent of our displaced are living in collective centers — converted factories, schoolhalls, gymnasiums. All are grim and overcrowded. UNHCR has managed to help provide a sense of privacy by partitioning the larger spaces into family sections. We have, with the cooperation of our partners — MSF Belgium and Equilibre of France — installed heating and cooking facilities, baths and toilets. Altogether we have completed 123 projects costing about $1 million.

We visit as many of the collective centers as we can on a daily basis. It is not as easy to get around the thousands of host homes. Jeon, our South Korean field officer, and Aida, his local field assistant, spend most of their day talking with the displaced. Jeon speaks Russian, as well as 11 other languages. Aida, a Daghestani, not only has Russian, English and German but most importantly she understands Chechen. Some of the displaced either cannot or will not speak Russian! I am a well known monoglot, but I am taking lessons in Russian. So far I have only managed to improve the English of my teacher!

One of the best of the collective centers is at Novoselskoye, where one room is occupied by the Sakazov family; Shirvan, his wife Rosa and what he calls his football team — their 12 children. They left Gudermes in March 1995 and have lived in the center for 15 months so far. There is a super little school near the center but none of the displaced children attend it. Their parents do not have the small sum to pay the fees. We are negotiating on this. It is a tragedy upon a tragedy that the children lose a year out of school when one is so close.

At the moment we have a visiting U.S. delegation assessing how we spent the money they gave us last year and how much they will give us this year. In truth, it is a chore escorting delegations, they distract from our daily job. But if they bring gifts from afar and keep the program running, then we have all the time in the world for them. This delegation is good on talking to the displaced. This pleases me. Surely they will leave with far more compassion and sympathy than if they had spent their time looking at latrines and wells and heating pipes. In one center they found a girl who was about to get married as the war began. Tradition demands that she has a wedding dress. She had one but it was left behind in the rush away from the bombing. The wedding is delayed until she can find a dress.

We get excellent cooperation from the government and local authorities, which makes our professional life so much easier. It also helps our social life. We are considered to be part of the community and we get invitations to many local events. Today, we are taking the U.S. delegation to the presentation of a "Hero of the Russian Federation" decoration to an old soldier who lives in the village of Chagar-otar, which is hosting some of our internally displaced people. The hero, Hakim Isakovic, had carried out his great deed of raising the Soviet flag on the Reichstag building in Berlin in 1945. But it had taken 51years for his brave act to be acknowledged. He is now a fit 80-year-old. He has a grand day and so do we.

We motor back 150 kms to Makhachkala to meet with the government. They leave the U.S. delegation in no doubt that funds are needed.

We put the Americans up in a local hotel for the night. Later, Aida tells me that they really do have their hearts in the right place. They asked her how much a wedding dress costs and have given her the money to buy one for the girl in the collective center. All they want in return is a wedding photo. I am really impressed. I will get a photo of the wedding and try to have it published in a later edition of this magazine.

The bride got her funds. I hope we get ours. If we do, the program will run until the end of the year. WFP will provide food until next March. I hope that we can get everybody back in their own houses before the winter. It can be bitterly cold here. And no matter what we do, collective centers can never be home. The peace talks seem to be going well but few of our IDP's are optimistic.

If they do all return. We will leave. I will miss Daghestan. The people have been great hosts to both the displaced and to us. "Na zdarovye," or "cheers" as my Russian teacher now says!

Breaking down the barriers

Anna Nylander
UNHCR Protection Officer – Banja Luka, Bosnia-Herzegovina

Anna Nylander, who is Swedish, has been working since February as a protection officer in Banja Luka, the second largest of the eight UNHCR offices in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

All of her time has been spent trying to negotiate visits by displaced Muslims to their homes here in the Bosnian Serb Republic, and by displaced Serbs to their homes in the Bosnian Federation. It's a frustrating job. Nine out of 10 visits requested are either refused or aborted because of last-minute security concerns.

At 8 a.m., Anna is in the office, checks her messages, attends the morning staff meeting and departs for the field. She drives the white UNHCR Nissan Patrol vehicle herself. She is accompanied by her assistant, Momir, who works as her interpreter during the difficult negotiations. Young Momir is a refugee himself. He fled from Knin in Croatia in August last year when that area was taken by the Croatian army.

Anna and Momir are on their way to Sipovo, 90 minutes south of Banja Luka. There they will have a meeting with the mayor about an upcoming visit to the town by displaced Muslims. Sipovo is in the so-called "Anvil," an area which was severely destroyed by the Bosnian Croat forces before it was handed back to the Bosnian Serb Republic.

In Sipovo, Anna meets up with her colleague, Aurvasi, a UNHCR protection officer from the Zenica office. She is coordinating the upcoming visit to Sipovo from the Federation side, where the former residents of Sipovo now live as displaced persons.

At 10:15, they are greeted by the mayor of Sipovo with small talk, coffee and plum brandy. They all have countless hours of negotiations behind them. Two successful visits by Muslims to Sipovo have already been arranged, and now a third is being discussed.

The mayor, a pleasant doctor in his mid-thirties, asks Aurvasi to send his greetings to his former colleagues in Zenica, whom he still considers his friends. But when the negotiations start, the mayor is transformed into a tough negotiator. After two hours, he finally agrees to the planned visit. As usual, he invites the UNHCR delegation for lunch, and as usual they politely decline because of their tight schedule. After leaving the mayor's office, Aurvasi returns to Zenica.

> It is a frustrating job.
> Nine out of 10 visits requested are either refused or aborted
> because of last-minute security concerns.

Anna and Momir leave Sipovo at 12:45, going back the same way they came. Halfway between Sipovo and the town of Mrkonjic Grad, they stop in a Muslim village, one of the few in the Serb entity where the inhabitants stayed on unharmed during the whole war. Anna and Momir pay a visit to one of the families to check if everything is in order in the village. As always, the small living room quickly fills up with friendly villagers. Coffee and brandy are served, and the visitors have a hard time extracting themselves.

At 3 p.m., they arrive at the mayor's office in Mrkonjic Grad, where Anna wants to set the date for a future meeting. The recently married mayor is in a very good mood and tries to bring out the plum brandy. Anna quickly but courteously declines. Her next meeting is with the local IPTF (U.N. International Police) commander about the planned Muslim visit to Sipovo. Then she goes to the IFOR (NATO-led Implementation Force) compound to pick up the mail. There she meets a displaced Serb from Bugojno who has come to IFOR with his problems. He does not want to return to his home town, which is in the Federation, and asks about the prospects of resettling in another country. Anna listens to him and tells him to come to our office in Banja Luka. However, she knows that the possibilities for this man to get refugee status are very slim indeed.

It is now 5 p.m. Apart from a few bananas, Anna and Momir have not had any lunch. They still have a tiring drive ahead of them. They arrive back at the office at 6 p.m. Anna still has to write her daily report, which she finishes at 7:30 p.m. At home, she cooks a pasta dinner for herself, reads some papers she has not had time for during the day, and tries to relax in front of the TV. By 10:30 p.m. she is in bed. Early tomorrow she will start another exhausting but interesting day in Banja Luka.

Mária Cierna (left) interviews a Bosnian returnee departing Slovakia.

Slow bus to Bosnia

Mária Cierna
UNHCR Public Information Officer – Bratislava, Slovakia

It is the hardest day so far on my new job — taking care of 77 refugees returning to Bosnia.

It is 9 a.m. and a cold wind is blowing on the Croatian-Bosnian border, in a small mountain village called Kamensko. Women, children and elderly people, who have filled every seat on two buses, are exhausted. They do not understand why they have to wait so long in a place which is so close to their homeland — yet they do not complain. Four years of war have taught them to wait and suffer in silence. They have pictured this moment many times. Just a few more hours and they will be home.

Border officials are seeking huge customs duties for the truck transporting the refugees' worn-out possessions. It's the third major problem we've faced since yesterday's departure. Last night, a Bosnian returnee was detained at the Hungarian-Croatian border and not allowed to continue the journey. And the Bosnian representative in Split, who was supposed to take responsibility for the group, never showed up.

And now, they want to collect money from the returnees, who don't have a penny! Realizing this, the customs officer runs to me and says UNHCR has to pay. It is obvious that we're going to be stuck here a long time.

At noon, I wonder how long the food we've distributed to the returnees will last. The kids have already eaten the sweets and fruits; the adults took care of the bread and pepperoni. Children who ate all of their food are squinting at kids who still have something left. If they keep us waiting here, there won't be enough food for the journey to eastern Bosnia. If only we could cross the border.

It's now 2 p.m. Nurja and Ajša M., a married couple in their mid-seventies, are the most silent and patient people on the bus. Quietly, they watch every move of the border officials. They long to go back, to hug their children and grandchildren after four years of separation. "It wasn't bad in Slovakia," they tell me. "We had enough to eat, a heated room, clean laundry. But when your own people are not with you, you have no one to live for."

Rabija Z., a middle-aged woman with two children, sits in front of the old couple. She stares blankly out the window. She is very sad. Nobody is waiting for her at home. She once had a husband whom she loved, a house where they used to live, children. She has lost a lot. She's coming back home a widow. She cries. Her little boy, playing in the aisle, runs to her and hugs her. He wipes away her tears with his small hands.

At 3 p.m., a young customs officer with an unpleasant demeanor tells me to follow him to a small cafe. I don't know why, but I fear this man. He orders some drinks and inquires about my work. Then he starts talking about himself and the reasons he hasn't married. He eats a sandwich. I think about the lack of food for the returnees.

The customs officer notices that I am nervous. Nevertheless, he keeps saying strange things. Finally, he gets to the point. He informs me that he has decided to arrange our crossing. We won't have to pay anything — he's going to arrange that with his supervisors in Mostar. He finds my embarassment funny. He finally allows me to leave the table. I keep trembling all the way to the bus.

Very quickly, at 3:30 p.m., we move refugees' bags from the truck to two buses belonging to a Bosnian company. We divide people into two groups. The first convoy will go to Kljuc, Bosanski Petrovac, Bihac and Sarajevo. The other will go from Maglaj through Zenica, Tuzla and Zvornik to the eastern Bosnian town of Gradacac.

A few minutes after 4 p.m., we finally cross into Bosnia. I am proud to accompany the very first organized group of Bosnian returnees from Europe. The beautiful, mountainous area is covered with snow, but the country is devastated by war. The returnees are emotional, and many are unable to chase away their tears. Soon they will be home.

Signed: "Desperate Asylum-Seeker"

Sabine Racketseder
UNHCR Case-Worker – Vienna, Austria

"And what do you do there?" is the question that people ask when I say I'm a case-worker with UNHCR in Vienna. The answer: receive and make phone calls and reply to mail.

As a case-worker in the legal unit, I deal with individual cases, in co-operation with the protection officer. Calls and letters from individual asylum-seekers and refugees, with various requests and pleas for help, are first addressed to me.

Many of the asylum-seekers who contact us are in detention. They write in their native language, and their letters need to be translated. The outcome usually hinges on finding a non-governmental organization (NGO) taking care of refugees — or another competent person nearby — who can visit the asylum-seeker in detention and provide legal counselling. I visit detention centers myself from time to time in order to speak personally with asylum-seekers and refugees, and to see how they are accommodated. This is often shocking: small, cramped cells, miserable sanitary conditions. They're all bored to death. Their only activity, if you can call it one, is waiting, waiting, waiting — sometimes for weeks and months.

We don't get mail only from refugees in detention. When asylum-seekers run into problems with the asylum procedure — if they feel their application has been wrongfully rejected — they contact UNHCR. I often refer them to UNHCR's partners in their locality (NGOs or lawyers). If, after examining the person's reasons for flight, we do feel that he or she is a refugee within the meaning of the 1951 Convention — and if all legal recourse has been exhausted — UNHCR intervenes directly with the authorities.

Some refugees request UNHCR's help with finding accommodation, resolving difficulties with travel documents, or financial problems. There are also requests for family reunion and resettlement with family members in other countries. The telephone conversation alone is sometimes very difficult, since often the person on the other end has a hard time using a foreign language, or is very upset. Even finding out the reason why they're calling is sometimes quite a lengthy operation. People also seek comfort — they want to unburden themselves and simply need to talk to somebody. So I try to listen patiently; meanwhile, the other line starts ringing, somebody appears in the doorway, and work piles up on my desk. However, it is not me who should be pitied, but the despairing individual on the other end of the line.

Hectic situations arise whenever we must intervene to prevent a forthcoming deportation. Usually we only know a few hours before the plane takes off that somebody is to be returned to his country of origin. Do we feel the person is in need of international protection? If so, we need to contact the refugee counsellors at the airport and intervene with the authorities. Occasionally, we inform the media. Sometimes we manage to stop a deportation; unfortunately, not always.

> Direct contact with refugees is the motivation for my work.

I also help set up general statistics on the overall situation for refugees in Austria. Where do asylum- seekers come from? Why is the number of asylum-seekers from Country X on the rise? Why are refugees from Country Y hardly ever granted asylum? Such queries need analysis of selected individual cases. Regular contact with NGOs taking care of refugees is vital.

Direct contact with refugees is the motivation for my work. It can be frustrating. But I consider individual case-work a very important domain within UNHCR. I never run out of work, and in a way it never ends. When I leave the office in the evening I take some individual cases home with me, in my thoughts.

Country in transition

Linas Sesickas
UNHCR Liaison Officer – Vilnius, Lithuania

I remember my shock at seeing conditions at the Yanaua detention center, 130 kilometers from Vilnius.

Thirteen Somalis had spent three months in the dark, three meters underground, in horrifying conditions. They never saw the light of day except during the daily exercise hour. They suffered from eye problems. It was terribly hot. The air was heavy, unbreathable. The place made you claustrophobic. The Somalis were in the midst of their second hunger strike.

Only four months after I was seconded from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to work for UNHCR, the Lithuanian Interior Ministry, alarmed by this second hunger strike, asked me to go and talk to the Somalis and try to defuse the tension.

Of course the living conditions of these asylum-seekers shocked me. But what appalled me the most was the uncertainty they had to cope with on a daily basis.

It's certainly difficult for someone to live imprisoned when you've committed no crime. These Somalis were considered criminals, but in fact they weren't treated as such. After all, a criminal is judged and condemned to a specific punishment. He knows that his prison stay will be of fixed duration. He knows the outcome. But these Somalis didn't.

It must be horrible not to know what tomorrow will bring, not to know when this hell will finally end.

These Somalis came through Moscow. They didn't want to talk about the road they followed to end up in the Yanaua jail. But, most probably, they crossed illegally via the Belarus border — like the 300 other illegal migrants who are in Lithuania, dreaming of only one thing: to go further west. Usually, they want to go to the Nordic countries, even if it means risking their lives crossing the Baltic Sea in an old boat.

This particular group of Somalis didn't want to go further west. They were asking for asylum in Lithuania. But they will have to wait for it. There are still a lot of obstacles to overcome.

None of the Baltic states has signed the 1951 Convention, but Lithuania is the only one to have adopted a law on refugees, on 4 July 1995. The new law will come into effect once all the required infrastructure is in place, including a reception center for refugees, financed jointly by the Nordic countries, UNHCR and UNDP.

> Why would a country, which for years had been a refugee "producer," impose so much hardship on asylum-seekers?

While listening to the Somalis, I could not stop asking myself why a country like Lithuania, which for years had itself been a refugee "producer," could impose so much hardship on asylum-seekers ? These people were not dangerous. They did not represent a threat. Could the demography of the country explain this intolerance? Not really. After all, if Russians represent a third of the Estonian and Latvian population, it is only 8 percent in Lithuania.

I would rather explain the xenophobia as being caused by the difficulty which the Baltic countries have in recognizing that they are now part of a shrinking, interdependent world. When you've lived for decades in a closed society, where the outside world barely exist, it's difficult to change your thinking overnight — to realize that you are, in fact, a tiny part of a huge world.

That's the sad reality of countries in transition.

A person of color can walk around in Stockholm, Oslo or Helsinki without attracting attention. But it's unusual on a Vilnius street. Everyone stops to look. The 13 Somalis could not move without being noticed.

Fortunately, a week after my visit, the Somalis were transferred to another center where conditions were more humane — at last they could see the light of day and didn't live three meters underground. But they still had no freedom of movement.

They are still living there and they are waiting for the end of the year to be accommodated in the new reception center, where their case will be examined. If they are recognized as refugees, they should be allowed to integrate in Lithuanian society.

So, there is some light at the end of the tunnel. Maybe now they feel that their future is a little less uncertain.

Meanwhile, back at headquarters...

High Commissioner Sadako Ogata is often asked what personal traits are required to lead a worldwide humanitarian agency responsible for protecting and assisting millions of often desperate people.

"A warm heart and a cool mind," replies Mrs. Ogata, a former Japanese diplomat and academic who was recently described by one writer as "chief surgeon in the world's emergency room."

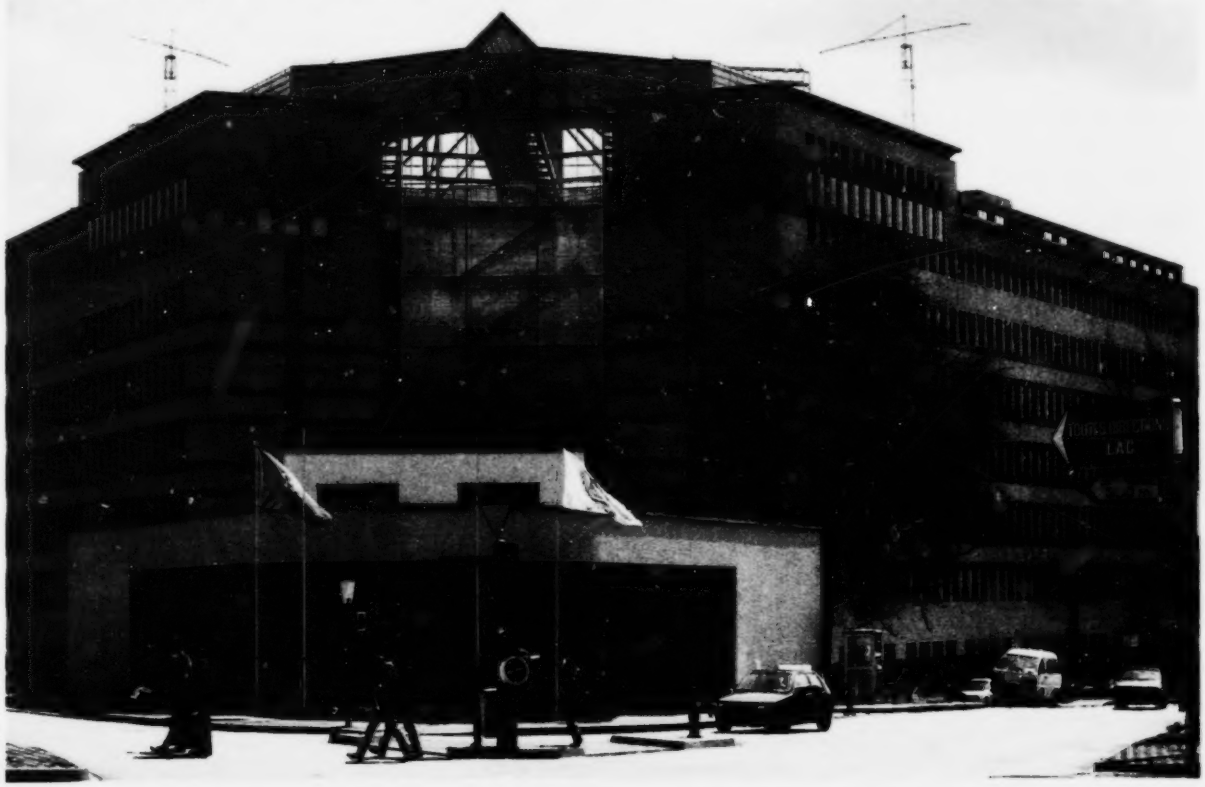
Her response reflects the philosophy of an organization that must be compassionate and refugee-focused while at the same time confronting the cold, hard realities of war, massive displacement, "ethnic cleansing," closed borders, growing xenophobia and shrinking resources.

From her modest seventh-floor office in UNHCR's Geneva headquarters, Mrs. Ogata oversees the activities of more than 5,000 staff in some 250 offices in 120 countries. About 950 of those staffers work in Geneva. Their tasks range from all of the basic functions required for the smooth operation of any large corporation, to highly specialized skills needed by camp planners, epidemiologists, water engineers and nutritionists. They include secretaries; lawyers and refugee law specialists; medical personnel; resettlement officers; accountants and finance officers; fund-raising staff; personnel officers; communications and computer specialists; statisticians and archivists; travel and visa staff; logistics, transport and procurement officers; food aid coordinators; specialists on the environment and women and children refugees; administrative officers; program and budget specialists; field security officers; program coordinators; public information staff; emergency response teams; distribution specialists; desk officers for UNHCR activities in every region of the world, and many others.

Although the paper flow is enormous and days are filled with meetings, reports and phone calls, UNHCR headquarters staff do not generally fit the widely held stereotype of the desk-bound U.N. bureaucrat. Most have extensive field experience. And for most professional staff, a stint in Geneva lasts no longer than four years, when they once again "rotate" to a field post. At heart and in mind, Geneva staffers are very much field-oriented.

The same applies to Mrs. Ogata, who prefers to re-direct any praise of her leadership to the thousands of UNHCR staff serving in many of the world's most remote and dangerous places. "I'm often asked how I can cope with the enormous human suffering that we must deal with," Mrs. Ogata says. "Of course it's depressing, but the ones who really face it head-on — and who deserve most of the credit — are those people who are out there on the ground doing whatever they can to help refugees. Theirs is not an easy life. It's not me I'm worried about, it's them."

UNHCR's new Geneva headquarters.



UNHCR A. Hollmann

KENYA

Welcome to Camp Sadako

Sylvie Daillot
UNHCR Youth Awareness Programs – Dadaab, Kenya

The blazing sun has been beating down for several hours now on the semi-desert of eastern Kenya. In a cloud of dust, a UNHCR plane lands on the runway of Dadaab's tiny airport. Through the windows of the plane, Daniel and Ilaria have had time to catch a glimpse of the refugees' huts made of adobe, branches and plastic sheeting, as far as the eye can see.

And already, everything is different from what they had imagined before leaving, or after the brief training session they were given at UNHCR Nairobi. The first stereotypes have already vanished.

Daniel, Ilaria and today's other arrivals are not the usual aid workers flying in from Nairobi. These are young people who have come from all over the world to work as volunteers for one month in the refugee camps of Kenya.

They are welcomed to Dadaab by Linnie and Jacinta, the community service staffers who are going to accompany the team during the coming four weeks. They are introduced to the UNHCR and the NGO staffs and receive an explanation of each person's responsibilities. Next, they get a tour of the UNHCR compound, with its offices, public rooms and lodgings. They are assigned duties and make a first visit to the camps. In just a few hours, the members of the new team are ready to go to work.

Daniel and Ilaria's stay will be part of the "Camp Sadako" program, named for High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata. The initiative was launched by UNHCR in 1993, and is aimed at acquainting young people with the realities of life and work in the refugee camps. Including the 1996 group, 180 young people from 25 countries have worked with UNHCR and its refugee beneficiaries in "Camp Sadako" programs in seven asylum countries.

Daniel and Ilaria were selected, as were Annette, Martin, Francisco, Roslyn and Herta, by UNHCR offices in their respective countries — Australia, Germany, Canada, Spain and Italy. They pledged to cover their own travel expenses, to offer their services for one month to help the refugees and those who work with them in the camps, and to raise public awareness in their own communities when they get home.

Their work in the camp will depend upon their skills. Some will carry out detailed studies of certain aspects of the aid program, such as food distribution, help for unaccompanied children, the problems of site planning. Others will set up special activities for the refugees. All of them will bring new perspectives to the way in which these operations are administered in the camps.

Last year at Dadaab, two young girls organized volleyball teams for the Somali refugees — a real challenge in such a traditional society. Elsewhere, at Kakuma — where the first "Camp Sadako" was located — two young Australians set up a writers' workshop, where everyone could go to read, share, or discuss novels and poems. When they returned to Australia, with the assistance of the UNHCR and Austcare, they published a collection of these writings, "Tilting Cages."

The seven youths arriving this morning have yet to make their mark, but there is no doubt that by the time they leave, they will have made a contribution. And when they get home, they will continue to champion the refugee cause in their own country. Their predecessors, for example, have organized photo exhibits, have been covered extensively in their local media, and have given talks in schools and universities. Some have organized the collection of funds to finance camp programs. This year, 83 young people from 25 countries are participating in "Camp Sadako" projects in Guinea, Jordan, Kenya, Mauritania and Mexico.

Guitarama

Mist of flies in saturated air, led by
The stinking smell of decomposing corpses. Dead.
And the sweet breeze blows, but no man left, life has fled.
No face; no name; no identity. Poor child cry
Over your woman's mutilated body. Why
You? Birds sickly singing but no songs for them. Dead.
Further, others swelled in stacks, ground is their last bed.
No tears, fears, no blood-drops but lakes in his red eye,
Struggling alone... Again neither man nor god care
And their souls walk, haunting no one, while the human
Rats watch the lynching of a babe, all got a share!
And a scent of dust covers the land, African
Night where Guitarama stands alone in despair.

Eilise-Marie Demmer-Thornberry, 17 years old, Volunteer.

Rugunga Primary School pupils, including Marie with her new teddy bear, were thrilled with the Peace Packs sent by French Guides and Scouts.

Children united

Rugunga Primary School — *Kigali, Rwanda*

It is 9 a.m. — a special morning — at the Rugunga Primary School, in the suburbs of Kigali, Rwanda. Hundreds of children wait with growing impatience for the arrival of the UNHCR trucks. They are waiting for "Peace Packs" — parcels individually prepared for them by children in the far-off country of France.

When the trucks appear on the road, the children begin to clap their hands. "The presents, the presents!" they shout.

Amid much jostling and excitement, the packages are distributed to each child. And each child finds notebooks, colored pencils, a pencil sharpener, an eraser and a ruler, a t-shirt, underwear, some toiletries, a toy and a little note or a drawing from the French children who put the packages together. The toothbrush is an intriguing and very precious object, a real luxury. But the magic slates, the balloons and the tiny cars cause the greatest excitement.

The 8,400 little packages that arrived at Kigali airport some days earlier were collected under the "Peace Pack" project, which was jointly launched at the end of 1993 by UNHCR and the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts. Since then, more than 250,000 individual parcels have been prepared in some 40 different countries, involving 1.7 million young Guides, Scouts and the Scout movement as a whole.

In France, as elsewhere, the campaign has served as a good opportunity to raise public awareness of the plight of refugees. In addition to making the Peace Packs, Guides and Scouts around the world have studied the refugee situation, held group discussions, viewed films of various UNHCR operations and activities, played a simulation game aimed at teaching them more about flight and exile, and held public collections to gather the items that go into the Packs.

The hundreds of thousands of Peace Packs have been shipped to refugee camps worldwide, most of them at no charge thanks to the generosity of several international shipping and transport companies. They are handed out to refugee, displaced or repatriated children by UNHCR staff or non-governmental organization personnel.

In one of the packages delivered to Kigali was a note from Hannah: "My friends of Rwanda, I have heard about you on television. I am thinking about you and am sending you this little package. I send you a hug and hope that all these things will be useful for you. Signed: A little girl from France, Hannah."

Thousands of similar messages have crossed continents and oceans: from Japan to Afghanistan, Great Britain to Côte d'Ivoire, South Korea to Sri Lanka, the Nordic countries to Tajikistan, Australia to Kenya, Canada to Mozambique. The list goes on and on. In other countries, like Guatemala, the project has helped to renew the ties between those who stayed at home and those who are coming back from years in exile.

The initiative has also made local children aware of the refugees in their own countries. In Romania, for example, the distribution of Peace Packs to Albanian, Afghan, Iranian and Somali refugee children in a camp at Gociu was the springboard for a local project by Romanian children to involve the refugees in their own society and activities.

Today, the delegates of the French Guide and Scout movement who came to help distribute the packages in Rwanda have found in the children's laughter ample reward for many months of hard work by their associations. At Rugunga, international solidarity wears the face of a happy child who has just received a gift. The picture of Marie's beaming smile as she cuddles her new white teddy bear is the most beautiful return gift she could make to the children in far-off France who sent it to her. **S.D.**

There are some 2 million Rwandan and Burundi refugees in five countries of the Great Lakes region.

Saturday in Kibondo

John Nkosi
UNHCR Field Officer – Kibondo, Tanzania

It's Saturday and I awaken to my alarm clock, a noisy generator 30 meters from my window that sputters to life every morning at exactly 6:30. We work weekends in Kibondo, and so does the generator. Fifteen minutes later, the caretaker of UNHCR's office/guesthouse arrives, and another day begins in earnest.

The caretaker's first task is to fetch water from our neighbor, who has a pump and has graciously agreed to provide water to us as well. Kibondo, about 270 kms from the Tanzanian town of Kigoma, has had no water for six months. But it has plenty of refugees. Some 25,000 of the 94,000 Burundi refugees currently receiving asylum in Tanzania are here. Another 110,000 Burundi refugees are in Zaire.

Over a breakfast of tea, boiled eggs and bread, I work on a report in preparation for the arrival later in the day of a mission from Geneva headquarters, as well as a site planner who will look at new locations for possible camps. During my occasional visits to Mwanza or Kigoma, I try to stock up on such luxuries as cheese, butter and bacon to vary and enrich my breakfasts, but the supplies never last long enough. The exigencies of field work bog me down in Kibondo.

I fax my report to UNHCR Kigoma at around 7:50 a.m., and then consult my schedule for the day. I have only four main activities: a routine appointment with the District Commissioner at 8:30 a.m.; monitoring food distribution and interviewing new refugee arrivals in the camp; picking up the UNHCR mission at Kibondo airstrip at 1 p.m. — provided the rain doesn't delay the small UNHCR plane — and then visiting the border and inspecting proposed contingency camp sites.

The phone rings at 8:15 a.m. and Kigoma confirms that the visitors will

arrive at the airstrip as planned. My four-wheel-drive vehicle has mechanical problems, so I arrange another and set off for the District Commissioner's office. At the same time, my field assistant departs on the 20-minute drive to the camp to begin, along with a World Food Program (WFP) officer, monitoring the day's distribution of food to the refugees. I will join them later.

The first topic with the District Commissioner involves a vehicle for his office which was promised some time ago by UNHCR. He asks me to again remind Kigoma Sub-Office about the long overdue vehicle. I tell him I've noted his concern, but explain that the procedures for obtaining a vehicle require time. Next on the agenda is a request for UNHCR to consider paying compensation to local Tanzanians who received the refugees from Burundi during the influx in 1993. I explain the technicalities of budget cycles and ask why it has taken two years for a such a request to be made. I get no specific answer. By 9:45 a.m. the meeting is finished.

I drive to the camp and straight to the distribution point. Refugees are receiving sorghum because maize is in short supply. The field assistant is there with the WFP food monitor. The distribution is proceeding smoothly, so I move on to a second distribution point in the camp. There, the refugees also are receiving sorghum instead of the usual maize. I ask a few refugees what they think of the sorghum. They tell me that back home in Burundi, they mainly use sorghum for brewing beer.

A deaf refugee suddenly appears and begins shouting at everybody in the distribution shed. The guards escort him to me and he demands that I hear his complaint. Using sign language, he explains that the food distributors have not given him the required ration. We call for the scales and weigh his food parcel. It is a correct ration. Still, he insists that he has not received enough beans and demands that I intervene and order the distributors to add more. I ask him to go home, explaining through an interpreter who uses signs, that the rations have been carefully premeasured and everybody is getting the same share. He leaves.

It is almost midday. I grab a Coke at the camp market place, then go to the reception center to interview some new arrivals. Among them is a student who says he first came to Kibondo with the 1993 influx, but decided to return to Burundi in 1994. Now he has come back to Tanzania, and cites a recent attack at his school in Canguzo in which all Hutu students were threatened. The settlement commandant is also at the center and we register the student.

At 12:30 p.m., I head for the airport. Since the food distribution is still going on, the field assistant stays behind in the camp with the WFP monitor. The road to the airport is a nightmare. It was last "repaired" over six months ago. We are driving behind another car on this dusty road at 20 kms per hour. Forced to choose between dust and heat, we roll up the windows and swelter in our UNHCR t-shirts. We make it to the airport just in time to see the UNHCR plane circling the town to let us know it has arrived.

The plane lands, the visitors are welcomed and we quickly climb into the vehicle for the afternoon schedule. From the airstrip, we head to the UNHCR office for a quick lunch of rice and tough chicken, then begin the one-hour trip to Mabamba border post, one of the entry points for refugees from Burundi. In Mabamba town, officials tell us that there are five refugees waiting to be taken to Kanembwa camp — a family of four and a student. The head of the family explains that he had fled to a temporary site in Nyakimonomono, Tanzania, in 1993, but returned to Burundi when the refugees there were transferred to more permanent camps. Recently, he said, uniformed men killed his brother and he had to flee with his family again. They walked two days from Karuzi province in Burundi, and he vows that he will not return home again until he is sure it is safe. The student says he fled because of an attack on his school in which two people died, including one of the teachers. As usual, we call our local partner, Tanganyika Christian Refugee Services (TCRS), by radio and ask them to transport the refugees to Kanembwa camp.

It is now 3:30 p.m. and we still have to see Nduta contingency site, a 45-minute drive down a road overgrown with tall, thick grass. We creep along at 20 kms per hour, following another vehicle that is carrying the TCRS project coordinator, who is responsible for site development. With 9 kms to go, the lead vehicle has a flat tire. There is no wheel spanner in the vehicle, so the project coordinator joins us in our vehicle and calls TCRS mechanics by radio to come and fix the tire.

We have to cross a river to get to the Nduta site, but the bridge is gone. We leave the vehicle and walk across the river on a foot bridge, which is constructed of two small poles. The river is a potential source of water for a camp. The project coordinator throws a piece of grass into the river to estimate its flow per second.

After a walk of about a kilometer, we reach the contingency site, an area of about 600 hectares. It is infested with tsetse flies. We keep slapping ourselves to avoid the sharp stings of these insects. The UNHCR site planner takes plenty of notes as we inspect the area.

It is now getting late and is time to return to Kibondo. We arrive back at the UNHCR office/guesthouse at 6 p.m. The housekeeper has collected enough water for all of us to wash up before a dinner of potatoes and chicken. During and after dinner, we review the activities of the day and plan tomorrow's schedule. By 11 p.m., the generator shuts down and we light candles. I take the site planner to one of the two rooms in our guest house, say good night, and then go to my own room. I'm tired. Tomorrow is Sunday, but there is no guarantee that it will be a day of rest.

A long way from anywhere

Olivier Delarue
UNHCR Field Officer – Bassikounou, Mauritania

It is June 4, 1996, and we're in the eastern Mauritanian desert at Bassikounou and M'Berra camps, where there are 29,883 Malian refugees.

The torrid season is in full sway, with temperatures easily topping 45 degrees Celsius — in the shade. Today, UNHCR has scheduled a voluntary repatriation operation to help the Malian refugees to return to the locations of their choice in Mali.

Already shimmering in the sun, the white, covered lorries drive into Bassikounou camp. It is 6:15 a.m. We have to get the refugees into the trucks where, yesterday, they had loaded their belongings and their repatriation allowance. For the past several weeks, these future returnees have talked of nothing but their home country, the coming rainy season, the rising Niger River that they are going to see again after five years in exile in the Mauritanian desert.

Several old Tuareg women, their faces seamed by sun and wind, gaze for the last time at this camp, where so many things have happened. It is where they learned for the first time how to adapt to a total lack of privacy, typical of a huge camp; where they discovered market gardening, sewing and dyeing skills; where the women have had to forsake ancestral traditions that forbid them to appear in public in order to go to the distribution centers for their monthly rations.

The women, who come from the Timbuktu region of Mali, bordering on the Sahara, wonder what these changes will mean upon their return home.

An old chief approaches me to express his emotion and to extract my promise to visit him in his village of Tin-aicha. Last year we visited his village as soon as the guns were silenced after five years of fighting, and thoughts turned to going back. Since then, more than 12,000 refugees have repatriated under UNHCR's care.

What a strange feeling, to watch the departure of these refugees, whose joy and suffering we have shared for almost three years. This fleeting relationship brought together UNHCR staff from many distant lands and these nomads of the "great desert," who shared experiences that will live on in the memories of each one of them.

The 11-truck convoy, carrying a total of 418 refugees, rattles slowly off toward the Malian border, 60 kms away. UNHCR vehicles lead the convoy to ensure that nothing goes wrong until they arrive at Léré, where they will be met by UNHCR colleagues who will take over for the journey in Malian territory. The remaining refugees at the camp watch their compatriots disappear into the distance, and think about the approaching day when they too will return home.

8:00 hours: The convoy is gone and it's time for me to go to the monthly food distribution that began three days ago. We will parcel out to the refugees a total of 520 tons of foodstuffs. For the past several months we have been struggling relentlessly to make sure that the food is properly handed out to the refugees. Many cases of malnutrition have been detected in the camps, especially following delays in distribution. The permanent presence of UNHCR and World Food Program officers helps to keep fraud to a minimum. The distribution is now on an individual basis and in recent months the women have been coming in ever increasing numbers to receive the family ration. This is an encouraging sign because we know that in these traditional cultures, women are in charge of managing the household and feeding the family. The food will go where it is supposed to go.

Some families have been placed under special supervision after medical teams found a number of vulnerable cases. Tinitini is an example of this. She is a tiny 10-year-old girl who was living with her grandmother and her little brother. She weighed a mere 11 kg., because her grandmother was unable to supervise their diet properly. Goats had eaten part of their rations. Tinitini was moved to the nutritional recuperation facility in M'Berra camp (with 15,000 refugees). There she began to gain weight, and now is over 15 kg. Her frail little arms are beginning to take shape and Tinitini's smile, which never abandoned her — not even in the most difficult moments — shows her delight at being on the mend. The tribal solidarity that existed at home in Mali has been eroded in exile, with entire tribes having been scattered across Algeria, Burkina Faso and Mauritania. Tinitini's parents are refugees in Algeria.

10:00 hours: Golf Bravo Delta Juliet, the small UNHCR-chartered plane that is our weekly link with Nouakchott, 1,300 kms away, calls for the latest weather report from Bassikounou. Fortunately, there is no sandstorm today. Everything is ready for the landing.

10:30 hours: A rumble is heard in the distance and suddenly the plane appears out of the midst of a heat mirage. Moments later, the Canadian pilots deliver their passengers, already suffering from the overheated cabin. The plane takes off straight away: one spends the least possible time in Bassikounou! Radio checkpoints for the return route have been carefully established; there is nothing but desert between Bassikounou and Nouakchott. We storm the "mailman" distributing the just-delivered mail. We all want to find

out about new instructions from Nouakchott and from Geneva, and especially to get our personal mail. Letters from home are vital in overcoming the isolation and hardship of Bassikounou.

12:30 hours: The Prefect of Bassikounou, representing the Mauritanian administration, calls me to discuss the ration card controls in force in the camps. He wants to avoid possible outbreaks of cheating by discontented refugees. The support and the action of the local authorities are essential for our daily operations and we work closely and as transparently as possible with them. This builds mutual trust. Thanks to these open contacts, we were able to jointly carry out a rigorous new census in April 1995.

14:00 hours: It is more than 55 degrees Celsius in the sun, time to beat a retreat to the UNHCR base, where there awaits the absolute height of luxury — an air-conditioned room. Finally I can read the mail and draft the regular reports that are part of my duties. This is also the time for contacting Nouakchott by radio telex, so I can take stock of the day's activites with Michel Gaudé, the chargé de mission. These links are essential to the good management of the program, since they allow for information to be exchanged and any problems that arise to be solved immediately.

17:00 hours: We are interviewing refugees who want to return voluntarily to Mali. It is a solemn moment when the head of the family states his wish to return to his country, which he left five years ago. He fills out the return form and is told the next departure date. Each week a convoy travels to Mali.

19:00 hours: The sun, as enormous as it is everywhere in Africa, is about to disappear behind the three lone palm trees of Bassikounou. Suddenly the temperature drops and gives way to a light, delicious breeze, which eases the stinging heat of the day. Dinner with the three UNHCR and WFP colleagues is waiting. This is the moment to relax and recover physically from a very intense day.

21:00 hours: A radio call: our radio operator at M'Berra camp has just been alerted by the nurses at the dispensary. A woman is about to give birth but the baby is not coming out right. The medic in charge from our NGO partner is immediately called by walkie-talkie and gets ready to travel by night to M'Berra, 15 kms away. I must organize and locate, at this late hour, the members of the mandatory armed escort.

22:00 hours: A blanket of silence falls over this strange and fascinating world. Tomorrow will bring more unforeseen challenges.

Malian refugees in Aghor camp, Mauritania.

UNHCR / P. Arnold

Madness in Monrovia

Musa Abiriga
UNHCR Deputy Representative – Monrovia, Liberia

I was awakened at 5:45 a.m. by the sound of bombs exploding. These early morning attacks by NPFL/ULIMO (K), alias "Government forces," against Krahn positions at Monrovia's Barclay Training Center (BTC) and Camp Schiefflin had been going on for over two weeks. I was worried about it this particular day because we UN staff were planning to go to U.N. Mamba Point during the morning to try to salvage whatever remained in our looted offices.

After a quick breakfast of tea and bread, I proceeded to the 9 a.m. meeting only to find it was cancelled. At about 9:15, while having an informal discussion on the bad security situation in Monrovia, I heard gunfire coming from the direction of the bridge over the nearby St. Paul River. This was followed by continuous firing from our U.N. compound at Riverview towards the river. I was convinced that the long-awaited attack by the fighters and looters was on. A fellow from UNDP and myself rushed to the U.N. communications center to seek cover. I could see three of the staff hiding under tables while two others were rushing to the nearest bathroom.

The shooting lasted about 15 minutes. It turned out it was the result of a boat slowly floating along the St. Paul River, very close to the Riverview compound. On seeing the boat, the ECOMOG soldiers guarding Riverview thought that it was ferrying fighters and opened fire. When the ECOMOG soldiers stationed at the Tweh Farm compound on the other side of the river heard the shooting, they assumed that Riverview had been overrun by fighters of the ULIMO (J), and that the fighters were providing cover fire for men trying to attack Tweh Farm.

As I was preparing to depart along with other U.N. colleagues to go see what was left of our looted offices in Mamba Point, I received an unexpected visit from the coordinator of the Vahun shelter, where 75 unaccompanied minors were accommodated. The shelter is run by a local agency, Chidren's Assistance Program. The coordinator told me that the children had been sent out of the compound after the fighters had looted all their food and other belongings. The children had walked the previous day to Paynesville, a logging town near the Free port, and were currently resting at a school there. I immediately arranged to take the only remaining UNHCR truck — all the others were stolen — together with ECOMOG escorts, to Paynesville to collect the children. I drove our four-wheel-drive vehicle, although I knew it was risky because it had been the target a week earlier of a hijack attempt by six armed fighters. Fortunately, ECOMOG troops came our rescue.

This trip was not so comfortable either. Two ECOMOG soldiers were on the UNHCR truck, which was following me. We learned that earlier, a vehicle driven by the U.N. security assistant had been commandeered by armed fighters despite the fact that he too was escorted by two ECOMOG soldiers. As we drove through Dualel market, I could see armed men in looted cars which had been painted in camouflage colors. One such car overtook us and stopped. I could feel a cold sweat running down the back of my neck. My knees were shaking. I could hardly control my driving. However, the fighters ignored us and we drove on.

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On reaching the Paynesville school, the two ECOMOG soldiers appeared very scared, restless and in a bad temper. If the children were not ready, they said, we would have to return immediately to Riverview without them. I objected, but told those taking care of the children to hurry up. In less than 15 minutes, we had all 75 children aboard and headed back to Monrovia.

Mission accomplished, I tried to raise the U.N. communications center by walkie-talkie but was rudely interrupted by a fighter using one of our stolen handsets. "You clear the network, this is General Butt-Walked," he said. "Don't you see that we are busy on an operation?"

We delivered the children to a school for the blind near the Riverview compound, and I arranged for the coordinator to prepare food for them.

By 6 p.m., we were back at the residence of the UNDP Representative attending the daily security meeting. As the day had demonstrated, security was in short supply.

Life in the fast lane

Marie Okabe
UNHCR Senior Liaison Officer — New York

A typical day in the UNHCR Liaison Office to the United Nations, also known as "LONY," is a whirlwind of activity. There are eight of us in the office, but we don't deal directly with refugees. Instead, we try to keep refugees on the international agenda.

"Mr. Blatter, it's the 38th floor," secretary Jodette Cerrato tells Werner Blatter, the head of office. The "38th floor," the top floor of the gleaming United Nations headquarters building on the East River, is the office of the U.N.'s top official, the Secretary-General.

The urgent phone call is from an aide to Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. The aide wants an update for the Security Council on the refugee flows from Burundi. Refugees, being one of the most visible symptoms of things gone wrong in a country, are frequently cited in the Security Council deliberations to illustrate the link between humanitarian concerns and the need for political action.

The next call comes from the Secretary-General's spokesperson, who needs an update on unrest in the Masisi region of Zaire. With every bit of new information coming in from Geneva or the field, our job is make sure all the other relevant people across the street in the U.N. Secretariat get what they need, so that they can make policy recommendations with refugees' needs in mind.

By 9:30 a.m., we have decided which of the myriad of morning U.N. meetings we will attend. We pick three. They deal with landmines, sanctions, and cooperation with non-governmental organizations — all critical areas for UNHCR operations worldwide.

Who is going to undertake the painstaking task of de-mining in the Eastern Slavonia region of Croatia? Who is going to pay for it? At a meeting of the U.N.'s top military and political officers, Blatter flags UNHCR's biggest concerns in the region. UNHCR has been the lead U.N. humanitarian agency in former Yugoslavia since late 1991.

One floor below, Pirkko Kourula, the deputy who has worked in the New York office for the past five years, is briefing a U.N. colleague on the best way to navigate the bureaucracy in order to get key humanitarian supplies through a sanctions regime. Kourula should know. Aided by assistant Lili Soden, she has shepherded countless lists of Yugoslavia-bound humanitarian goods through the Sanctions Committee established by the Security Council.

I attend the third meeting of the morning. It is convened by the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, a relatively new department whose creation in 1991 to coordinate the humanitarian operations of the United Nations has added a new dimension to the work of our office. On this day, we have been asked to brief some NGOs on coordination arrangements in former Yugoslavia.

Back at the Liaison Office, Jennifer Rose and Jerusalem Eyob are working out the details of a symposium on post-conflict resolution which the High Commissioner is organizing at Princeton University.

While we were across the street, Tsegereda Assebe, LONY's able assistant, made that sure we met an important noon deadline to get UNHCR's input into the Secretary-General's report on Liberia to the Security Council. We report on the exodus of people fleeing the fighting in Monrovia by boat and its implications in the region.

Our office in New York may help refugees only indirectly, but we are certainly in the business of trying to ease the lives of UNHCR staff in the field. Much of that work is done by Kathy Papparizos, a 30-year veteran. Before lunch on this day, Papparizos tracks down the missing shipment of yet another staffer being transferred from one remote corner of the world to another and tries to help an American field officer sort out his U.S. income taxes.

Our office in New York may help refugees only indirectly, but we are certainly in the business of easing the lives of field staffers.

Afternoons at LONY can be quite hectic. A contingency planning meeting on Burundi, a special session of the General Assembly gathering to vote on the newest member for UNHCR's Executive Board, and discussions to decipher the just issued program for this summer's session of the Economic and Social Council in New York are just part of the activities.

At the end of a day like this, we can't forget to "phone home." Long after most U.N. staff have left for the day, LONY still is abuzz, reporting the day's highlights to Geneva, huddling to discuss tomorrow's agenda, doing a telephone interview with a radio station in Australia. The activity never seems to stop.

GUATEMALA

Fiesta at Cuarto Pueblo

Roberto Mignone
UNHCR Field Repatriation Officer – Cantabal, Guatemala

The sun rises over Cantabal, a muddy village in the Guatemalan jungle near the Mexican border. In the first morning light, I recognize the profile of the metal-roofed huts that have sprung up like mushrooms in the rain forest. In the sleeping streets, beer cans sink in the mud, bearing witness to the crazy night spent by soldiers and prostitutes, some of the main actors in this surreal theater played out every day in the Ixcán region of Guatemala.

Here the five members of the UNHCR Field Office live and work.

As soon as the UNHCR vehicle, a grey ant in the grass, takes the road to Victoria, a returnee village one hour away, the wild vegetation retakes unspoiled possession of its territory.

We drive in front of a military base, a wooden fortress which was attacked almost daily by the leftist guerrillas until a recent temporary cease-fire.

Our driver waves goodbye in Victoria, and I continue by foot to Cuarto Pueblo, a returnee village that is celebrating the second anniversary of the repatriation. Now I reach the river I have to cross, but where is the boat? There is no choice but to cross it by foot, the water almost up to my neck. I try to resist the strong river current and not to think about the alligator we saw slightly upstream last week.

Now I walk, three hours in the deep forest, up and down steep hills. Toucans and butterflies are all about, and mysterious jungle sounds capture my attention. I am fascinated but I could enjoy it even more if I wasn't sweating under the tropical sun.

I think about Cuarto Pueblo, a tiny village where the people, Mayan Indian farmers, fled terrified in 1982 when troops entered the village on a market day, massacred more than 350 women, children and men and burned down everything. It was in the midst of a counter-insurgency war in which civilians generally paid a high price as suspected or potential collaborators of one side or the other.

After more than a decade in Mexico as refugees, they are back. Guatemala has changed in many ways as the war subsides and the population dares to claim their due rights. But isolation and institutional neglect of these areas continue, and the questionable ability of the state to prevent human rights violations or guarantee justice means that UNHCR has a vital role in monitoring basic conditions for returnee reintegration.

Finally I arrive. The village appears, like a miracle in the jungle. Joyful children in their colorful traditional dress welcome me and lead me to meet the village leaders. They are glad to see UNHCR officers, it makes them feel reassured. Although we cannot visit as often as they would like.

Our office covers 13 villages: 10,000 returnees. Only five villages are accessible by car; visits to the others require long walks of up to eight hours.

On the hill is the UNHCR tent with a radio inside: returnees can call us at any moment in an emergency. I call my colleagues back in Cantabal to reassure them I have arrived safely. We try not to speak Spanish as our frequencies are constantly monitored.

A meeting with the village leaders: no problems of "protection" as neither the army nor the guerrillas have been seen. However, they report having heard firefights at night, in the direction of Pueblo Nuevo, another one of "our" villages.

Villagers have found more undetonated explosive in the outskirts of the community. It has been isolated and nobody was injured;

While some of the children caught a nap, the villagers danced late into the night to celebrate the second anniversary of their return home.

UNHCR / R. Redondo

thanks to prevention campaigns launched here by UNHCR in 1994 and 1995.

There are no major problems with the village's UNHCR-funded projects, the leaders report; the rehabilitated airstrip, the rice dryer machine, the chickens distributed to the families, the fruit-tree project.

They ask about this year's projects and request fuel-saving stoves for every family; desks and material for the school; another processing machine for the rice; chickens for the families who have recently arrived; a honey-bee project. I reassure them: we are working on it together with our implementing partner, CECI of Canada. We are all aware, however, that their needs are immense and that UNHCR can only help meet some of them.

The meeting ends and some children invite me to play soccer with them. Why not?

I then have an informal talk with the local Catholic priest, a dynamic young Spaniard. We exchange information and views on the situation of returnees.

The sun has gone down now. Members of the returnee women's organization invite me and other guests to share a simple but delightful meal by candlelight.

And the celebration continues into the night: small children sing, dance and perform skits for the whole village. A group of older students performs a theater piece satirizing the army and the conflict.

Speech time now! The leaders call "El Señor ACNUR" (Mr. UNHCR) to the stage to address the whole community. I don't really like to talk in front of big audiences but here I am, congratulating the returnee community for what they have achieved so far with such a big effort, encouraging them to continue against all odds and reassuring them that UNHCR will continue at their side for as long as possible.

A miracle in the jungle again: a live band, complete with generator, amplifiers and electric guitars which they carried through the jungle. They start playing ranchera music and soon the entire village is dancing under the stars. I dance with them and think about how lucky I am to share these moments with them. Elderly Mayan women observe the scene, small children run joyfully about, while young men with their cowboy hats dance seriously with beautiful Mayan girls.

The UNHCR tent awaits me now and I am so tired that, in spite of the hungry mosquitoes, I feel like I'm at the Sheraton. The returnees dance until dawn. For one night, at least, they seem to have forgotten all their troubles.

UNHCR / S. Hyuha

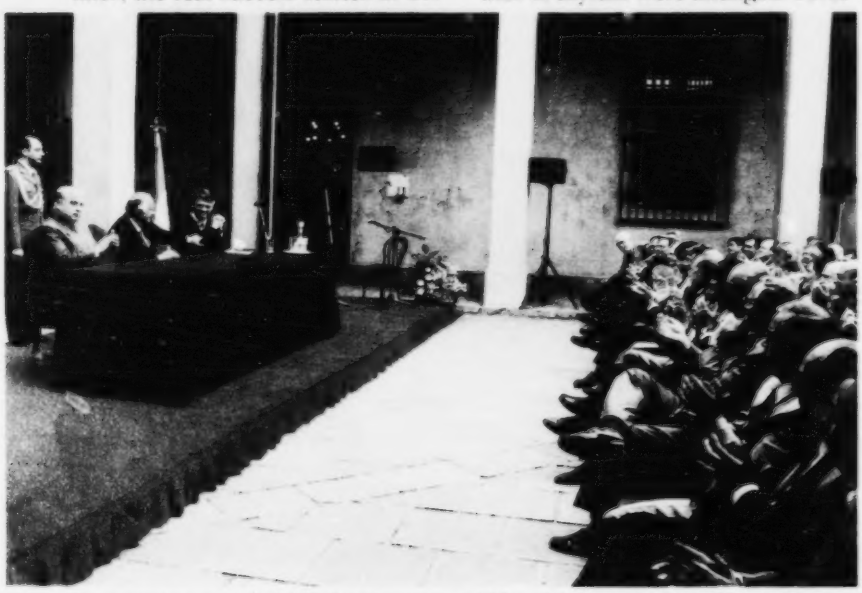
Thousands of returning refugees are literally carving a new life out of the thick jungles of Guatemala.

When we're no longer needed

Our worldwide review ends in Chile, a country where you'll have a hard time finding any sign whatsoever of UNHCR. There are no huge influxes or repatriations, no refugee camps or reception centers, no aid convoys or airlifts, no warehouses, no "safe havens," no major protection problems.

Instead, Chile is noteworthy because it represents another step toward the attainment of UNHCR's ultimate goal — going out of business.

While refugee emergencies and major aid operations make big headlines, the real success stories in UNHCR's world are usually quiet events like the one that took place in Chile on 14 March. That's the day UNHCR's Santiago office was formally closed after 22 often turbulent years.



A ceremony was held in Santiago on 14 March to mark the official closure of UNHCR's office after a 22-year presence.

Our departure went largely unnoticed by the rest of the world. But for tens of thousands of former refugees and for scores of UNHCR staff who had served in Chile, it was a day to remember.

UNHCR began work in Chile in 1973, a week after the overthrow of the government of Salvador Allende. Immediately after the coup, the then High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadruddin Aga Khan, sent a cable to the military junta reminding them of Chile's obligations to protect refugees. As soon as it had opened its office, UNHCR began helping thousands of refugees from other countries who had earlier fled to Chile, and who now were being detained or felt threatened under the new government. UNHCR staff established inviolable "safe havens" inside Chile where these refugees could be lodged, protected and assisted while new countries of asylum were arranged. Several appeals were issued asking third countries to open their doors to these refugees. In 1973-74, UNHCR Santiago managed to find resettlement for about 2,600 foreign refugees, helped those opting for repatriation to return to their countries of origin, and assisted the ones who chose to remain in Chile.

At the same time, UNHCR staff in neighboring countries had to cope with an influx of tens of thousands of Chileans escaping military repression. In all, UNHCR provided protection and assistance to more than 200,000 Chileans in surrounding countries. In the years that followed, UNHCR focused on reunifying the families of fleeing Chilean refugees.

Democratic reforms that began in 1988 also saw the beginning of the return of some Chilean refugees. In 1990, the Chilean government officially requested UNHCR to promote voluntary repatriation. UNHCR staff in Chile monitored the reintegration of returnees and helped resolve issues regarding their legal status.

Finally, in 1994, UNHCR announced that it was applying the Cessation Clause for Chilean refugees, meaning that the need for asylum in other countries no longer existed. It was an act that recognized that fundamental, positive changes had taken place in Chile. It was also recognition that UNHCR's direct presence was no longer needed.

Assistant High Commissioner Sergio Vieira de Mello represented UNHCR at a closure ceremony in the Presidential Palace in Santiago on 14 March. On 28 May, High Commissioner Sadako Ogata was presented Chile's Great Cross decoration, the country's highest award for non-heads of state. The award, presented at a ceremony in the Chilean Mission in Geneva, honored Mrs. Ogata's "distinguished career" and recognized UNHCR's "outstanding role... during a difficult period in our national existence."

Mrs. Ogata accepted the honor on behalf of UNHCR "as an expression of the pride we feel in having been of assistance to the courageous people of Chile during a sad and painful moment of its history."

Over 22 years, she said, UNHCR had "shared the suffering and hopes" of the Chilean people, and it was now time to leave. "We have turned a page in Latin America," she concluded, "and I sincerely hope that the services of UNHCR will never again be needed in this part of the world."

1. **How much of Refugees magazine do you read?**
   ☐ All or most ☐ Some ☐ None

2. **Do you use Refugees as a reference source?**
   ☐ Yes ☐ No

3. **How many people read the issue that you receive?** _____

4. **What do you like most about the magazine?** _____

5. **What do you like the least about the magazine?** _____

6. **How many issues of Refugees would you like to see published annually?**
   ☐ Four [current] ☐ Six ☐ Monthly ☐ Other _____

7. **Worldwide printing and distribution of Refugees magazine takes time. Does the content seem up-to-date when you receive your issue?**
   ☐ Yes ☐ No

8. **If you are a computer owner, would you be interested in seeing Refugees on the Internet?**
   ☐ Yes ☐ No

9. **Regarding overall content, each issue of Refugees should:**
   ☐ Provide an in-depth look at one theme, as at present
   ☐ Contain a variety of articles on different themes
   ☐ Comment _____

10. **What types of articles do you prefer in Refugees? Please rate from 1 (first preference) to 5 (last preference).**
    ☐ Human interest, feature-type stories about refugees and the people helping them
    ☐ Analyses of major issues involving refugees
    ☐ In-depth reports on UNHCR operations around the world
    ☐ Photo essays
    ☐ Other _____

11. **In general, do you find Refugees magazine:**
    Well-written and easy to understand? ☐ Yes ☐ No
    Attractive and well designed? ☐ Yes ☐ No
    Other _____

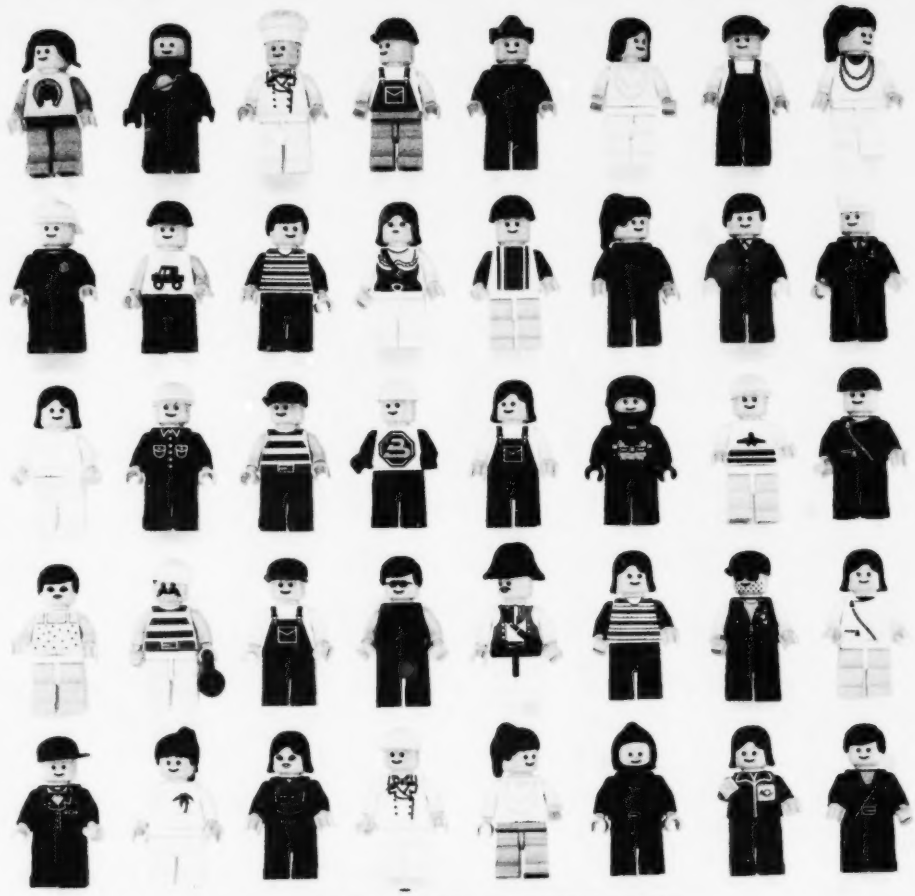
12. **Generally, articles in Refugees magazine are:**
    ☐ Too long ☐ Too short ☐ Just right

13. **Would you pay a subscription fee for Refugees magazine to help defray publishing and mailing costs?**
    ☐ Yes ☐ No

14. **What else can we do to make Refugees a better magazine?** _____

15. **To which category do you belong?**
    ☐ UNHCR staff ☐ NGO ☐ government
    ☐ student ☐ refugee ☐ other

Thank you.



SPOT THE REFUGEE

There he is. Fourth row, second from the left. The one with the moustache. Obvious really.

Maybe not. The unsavoury-looking character you're looking at is more likely to be your average neighbourhood slob with a grubby vest and a weekend's stubble on his chin.

And the real refugee could just as easily be the clean-cut fellow on his left.

You see, refugees are just like you and me.

Except for one thing.

Everything they once had has been left behind. Home, family, possessions, all gone. They have nothing.

And nothing is all they'll ever have unless we all extend a helping hand.

We know you can't give them back the things that others have taken away.

We're not even asking for money (though every penny certainly helps).

But we are asking that you keep an open mind. And a smile of welcome.

It may not seem much. But to a refugee it can mean everything.

UNHCR is a strictly humanitarian organization funded only by voluntary contributions. Currently it is responsible for more than 26 million people around the world.

UNHCR

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United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Models courtesy of the LEGO Group